Army National Guard Prepares for Hurricane Season With 'Connect Army Logisticians' Communications

Stephen Larsen

Experts predict that the 2006 hurricane season — from June 1 to November 30 — could include 13 to 17 named storms, 8 to 10 hurricanes and 4 to 6 major hurricanes of Category 3 (with winds of 111 to 130 miles per hour and storm tidal surges of 9 to 12 feet above normal) or higher. The outlook: above average storm activity in all categories. To be prepared, the National Guard Bureau's (NGB's) Army Logistics Division, in coordination with the Florida Army National Guard (ARNG), hosted an exercise in Orlando, FL, May 6-21, 2006, where NGB Soldiers from several hurricane-prone states such as Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana and Texas — as well as the Virgin Islands — were trained in using logistics automation and network equipment that could help potential relief efforts should disaster strike.

CSS VSAT satellites, such as these at a satellite farm at Camp New York, Kuwait, were used in a disaster relief training exercise in Orlando, FL, May 6-21, 2006. (U.S. Army photo by Stephen Larsen.)

The participants in the exercise, mostly enlisted Soldiers and field grade officers who had been involved in supporting disaster relief operations following Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma in 2005, trained with the same systems that compose the Army G-4's "Connect Army Logisticians" initiative. These systems include:

- Movement Tracking System (MTS) — a position navigation system that provides in-transit visibility and communications with logistics convoys.
- Battle Command Sustainment Support System-3 (BCS3) — the Army's tactical logistics command and control data system.
- Combat Service Support Satellite Communications (CSS SATCOM) system — provides Non-Classified Internet Protocol Router Network and voice-over Internet protocol access via CSS Very Small Aperture Terminals (VSATs), which are wirelessly connected to a local or wide area network via the CSS Automated Information Systems Interface (CAISI).

The MTS and CSS SATCOM systems are products of the Army's Program Executive Office Enterprise Information Systems (PEO EIS), and the BCS3 is a product of PEO Command, Control and Communications Tactical.

"One of the lessons learned in Hurricane Katrina was that the communications were not what they should be," said MAJ Robin Steffan, NGB Logistics Division, Logistics Management Branch Deputy Chief. "We want to develop a proof of concept. We plan to come up with a straw standing operating procedure here."

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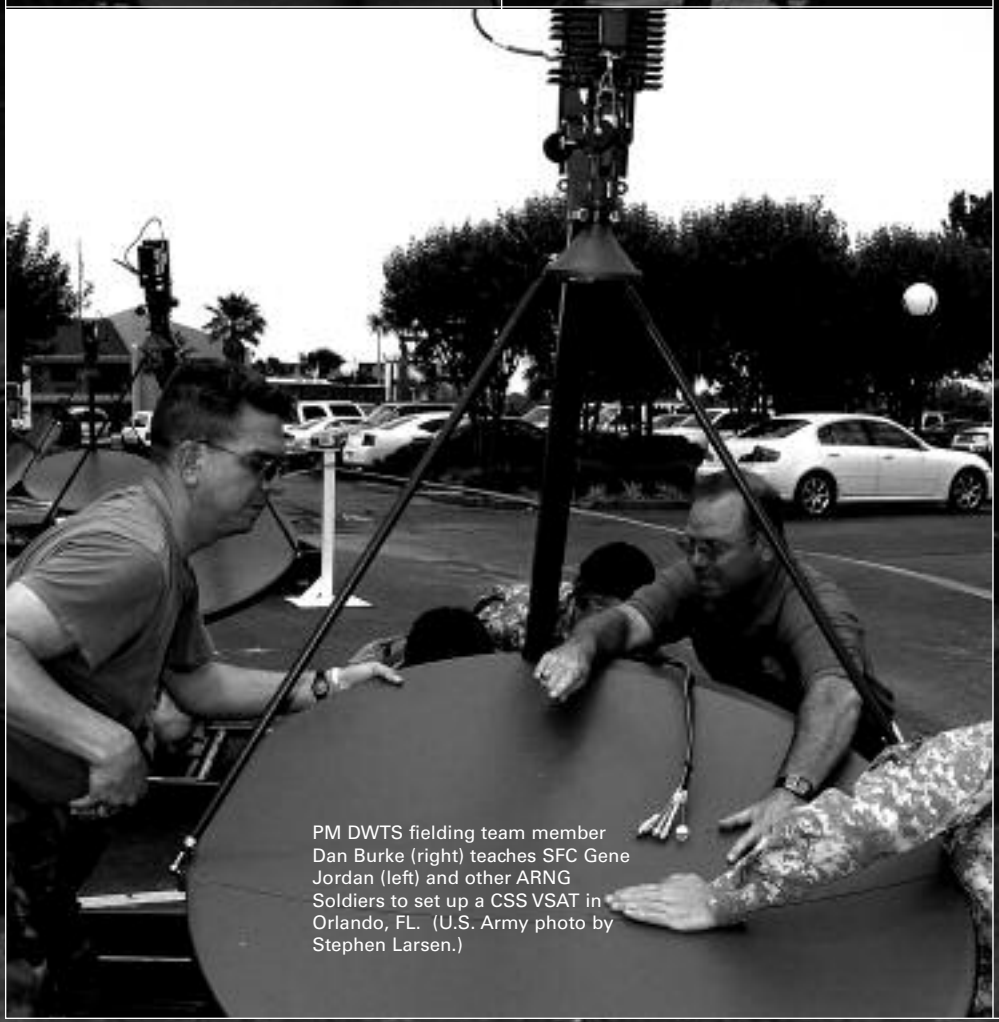
MAJ Richard Elam, Florida ARNG Deputy J-4, said this exercise helped with more than just hurricane relief efforts. "What about another 9-11?" asked Elam. "The rules change for hurricane relief and other disasters. We're trying to set up the basic tactics, techniques and procedures for each. We plan to set up a STAMIS [Standard Army Management Information Systems] gunnery to find out if we can send a requisition downrange."

Steffan noted that CSS VSAT and CAISI are both in the NGB's top 25 prioritized equipment list for Homeland Defense/Defense Support to Civil Authorities (HLD/DSCA). PEO EIS' Project Manager Defense Communications and Army Transmission Systems' Product Manager Defense Wide Transmission Systems (PM DWTS) sent CSS SATCOM fielding team members Dan Burke, Kenny Scott and Rick Ackerley, as well as support engineer Tommie Horton, along with four CSS VSATs, to the exercise to conduct new equipment training and to field the CSS VSATs to four ARNG units. CAISI training and equipment issue followed later in the exercise. First, the fielding team conducted classroom work with the Soldiers teaching them how the system evolved and how to set up and operate it. Then, they broke Soldiers into four groups, assisting each group as they set up their CSS



PM DWTS fielding team member Dan Burke (right) teaches SFC Gene Jordan (left) and other ARNG Soldiers to set up a CSS VSAT in Orlando, FL. (U.S. Army photo by Stephen Larsen.)

VSAT, found a satellite and then tore the unit down and packed it back into its respective transit cases.
Upon training completion, the team issued the CSS VSATS to ARNG units from Florida, North Carolina, Louisiana and Texas.

Was the training helpful? "Definitely," said SFC Gene Jordan, 449th Aviation Group, North Carolina ARNG. "Especially the hands-on training — I find I learn better that way." Jordan added that when he and his group got their CSS VSAT set up, the first thing he did was to pull up Army Knowledge Online and send an e-mail to his master sergeant back in North Carolina. "I told him this was good, it will help us," said Jordan.

"The Soldiers loved the training," remarked Steffan, adding that MTS will be fielded to ARNG units later in the summer and that BCS3 is being purchased with hands-on training to follow.

Collaboration With Army G-4

According to Steffan, the idea for the exercise grew out of discussions she had with LTC Forrest Burke of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, G-4, when both attended a logistics management seminar in early April. Burke said the thought process was to bring all the "enablers" together so they could understand what's needed to exchange logistics information. "This exercise is a welcome and necessary activity," said Burke. "Many NG units and Soldiers don't use and operate their systems everyday. In many cases, they have civilian technicians that might, but the Soldiers don't."

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Burke explained that as a force rotates into a new theater, there are typically two "capstone event" logistics exercises in which they participate. First, before departing for theater, they conduct a maneuver readiness exercise. Second, after arriving in theater, they conduct reception, staging, onward movement and integration, in which they stage a STAMIS gunnery.

"During the STAMIS gunnery, the unit puts all its logistics systems together and they 'test fire' the engines to make sure all engines are firing," explained Burke. "Besides providing that STAMIS gunnery experience for the NG units, the exercise also will help units in forging relationships with NG units from other states — which is a good thing, because disasters don't usually pick one state."

Another exercise purpose was to come to grips with the differences between using these systems in CONUS versus OCONUS. "The difference is twofold," remarked Burke. "First, OCONUS operations are more focused with clearly defined supply lines, while CONUS relief operations are a lot more permeable," he explained. "Second, there is less of an ability to interrogate locations of and information about materiel with radio frequency identification [RFID] technology in CONUS than in OCONUS. While OCONUS, it may take a year or two into an operation, but there is a build-out of RFID in ports, staging areas and so on — you don't have that latitude in America. BCS3, for instance, doesn't have a good view of road networks and staging areas here."

Addressing the Challenges

Steffan recounted how Soldiers repeatedly reported that outside agencies dropped off untagged equipment and supplies at Regional Support Areas during disaster relief efforts. "There is no guarantee that carriers coming from other states or agencies will have tags," Steffan said. "If the Soldiers have no ability to tag the shipment or the vehicles carrying the shipment to the next destination, they have no automated means of inventory or shipment control. Many times, the Soldiers have no means of communicating with the

PM DWTS fielding team member Rick Ackerley (second from right) assists ARNG Soldiers connect an antenna feed horn assembly to a CSS VSAT during their recent training exercise. (U.S. Army photo by Stephen Larsen.)

PM DWTS fielding team member Kenny Scott (right) explains the operation of a CSS VSAT to a group of ARNG Soldiers as part of the Army's overarching "Connect Army Logisticians" initiative. (U.S. Army photo by Stephen Larsen.)

next destination on the supply route as communications have not been reestablished telephonically or electronically yet. Also, cell phone communications are not always available or reliable, and Soldiers do not have access to satellite phones. Therefore, shipments may need to be reinventoried and manually redesignated at each leg of the journey."

Another challenge the NGB faces in providing relief to CONUS disasters, such as hurricanes, is the availability of a sufficient number of systems. For instance, while Modular Force units such as the 3rd Infantry Division have systems like CSS VSAT and CAISI at the company level, ARNG units only have enough systems to have these at the battalion level. Burke and Steffan acknowledge this is a funding issue, and Burke added that the Army G-4 is in the process of building a pool of equipment to issue to National Guard units that are mobilizing. "The equipment pool will give Army Guard units an additional resource to draw from in case they are deployed," said Steffan, "or they need to draw equipment to support HLD/DSCA. Meanwhile, NGB officials are doing all they can to equip their units in a timely fashion."

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The NGB is working to be proactive in their response to any calls for support during the 2006 hurricane season. The Florida exercise was a step in that direction, and Steffan rated the support from the PM community as "wonderful." "They [the PMs] supported us fully in the Florida exercise. If they had the money [funding] coming in, I am sure they would support us fully in our fielding goals."

"The good news story here," said Elam, "is the partnership between the PMs, the NGB and the states, all coming together to conduct this exercise. The PMs are all onboard, supporting us and getting us systems and training so we can better respond to another Katrina-like incident."

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